

Former Gulfco property cleanup in sight

By Chris Robinson
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FREEPORT — The sparse, rusted fence guarding the former Gulfco Marine Maintenance site is peeled back in some places, perhaps by the daring few who sneak across the restricted area to fish in the Intracoastal Canal.

It's not uncommon to see people fishing there, said Freeport Code Compliance Officer Coy Barnett. But if those folks were to shack up with nearby residents, they'd learn more severe consequences are at hand than trespassing charges.

The 40-acre site, which previously housed several barge-cleaning operations from the 1970s to the late 1990s, is home to an unknown amount of hazardous materials. Two Texas Commission on Environmental Quality studies in 2000 and 2001 confirmed the presence of toxic substances, but failed to identify the precise quantity.

In 2003, the area was designated by the Environmental Protection Agency for a Superfund cleanup. The project was stalled because the EPA could not identify the "Potentially Responsible Parties" or landowners who are liable for cleanup costs. Now, the next step in decontaminating the site is almost under way after sitting on the EPA's national priorities list for more than two years.

The recently identified responsible parties — Gulfco Restoration Group, Dow Chemical Co., LDL Coastal Limited and Sequa Corp. — now have 59 days to form a cooperative work plan for an environmental study of the site. Under EPA oversight, they will conduct a remedial investigation and feasibility study to determine the nature and degree of contamination as well as cleanup options.

In a statement, Dow spokesman David Winder said that while Dow never has owned the property, it is a former customer of a past site owner.

"As part of the Superfund process, the EPA identifies parties who can assist in the cleanup and who have had dealings with the site — which is why we were contacted," Winder said. "Dow is one of several parties that are members of the Gulfco Restoration Group, who are working cooperatively with the EPA and the TCEQ to conduct an investigation required by the order."

Linda Kyriakou, Sequa vice president of corporate communications, said Sequa's involvement is related to its 1986 acquisition of Chromalloy American Corp. Gulfco Marine Maintenance was a Chromalloy operation from 1971 to 1979. She said Sequa has been cooperating with TCEQ, EPA and Dow in this process.

"We expect to continue to work together to advance the investigation of the site," she said.

A representative for LDL Coastal, the current site owner, could not be reached for comment.

Additional companies might become involved in the Gulfco Restoration Group as information



is revealed throughout the study, said EPA Remedial Project Manager Gary Miller. The study and cleanup might extend to the surrounding area as well, said EPA attorney Barbara Nann.

Although the project will not rely on money from the federal Superfund, as previously suggested, it is still referred to as a Superfund project because the EPA will oversee all progress. No timetable for the length of the study, or subsequent cleanup projects, is available.

Freeport resident Bobby Jo Casale has been complaining about this site ever since he and his wife moved into an adjacent subdivision in 1981, he said. Casale said his family and some of his neighbors have suffered severe health problems from living next to the site.

The TCEQ studies identified dozens of contaminants present in the soil, such as semivolatile organic compounds, lead, zinc and pesticides. Many are a mouthful of four- and five-syllable chemical names that spell “danger” for those exposed.

While visiting doctors, Casale said they often would ask whether he had been exposed to chemicals.

“It’s a very trying episode and it’s not even over yet,” he said. “It has been a nightmare.”

Though he’s glad the ball is rolling again on the cleanup project, he said it’s unacceptable how long it has taken to get just this far.

“No way should people have to complain for 20 years about a facility and then finally have someone come in. Government agencies were late and lax in controlling the situation,” Casale said. “We’re talking about public health — period.”

The Texas Health Department never ordered an epidemiological study — an intensive, expensive investigation into causal health effects — on the area because, based on the results of TCEQ’s studies, which didn’t identify the quantity of materials, they ruled the actual danger of the site as “indeterminate.”

Susan Prosperie, Texas Health Department manager of exposure assessment and surveillance group, said when a site is indeterminate, the department does not respond because there is no clear evidence whether a site is hazardous enough to require an epidemiological study.

But this might change as new data becomes available.

“At these type of environmental things where exposure is relatively low — not like occupational exposures or other longtime exposure — there are too many combinations in there to just be able to clearly (figure) it out,” Prosperie said. “It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try and get more information and find out what we can do to avoid people from going through that (health hazards).”

ABOUT THE GULFCO SITE

- Barge-cleaning operations took place there from the 1970s to late 1990s.
- The EPA designated it for cleanup in 2003.

- TCEQ studies identified dozens of contaminants present in the soil, such as semivolatile organic compounds, lead, zinc and pesticides.

Chris Robinson is a reporter for The Facts. Contact him at (979) 237-0151.

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